

Osler's favourite book

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One of the many treasures of the Osler Library at McGill University is a small volume that can properly be described as Sir William Osler's favourite book — the 1862 edition of *Religio Medici* by Osler's lifelong mentor, Sir Thomas Browne.¹ Like many of Osler's copies of *Religio Medici* the book is bound in red morocco and its pages are gilt-edged. With the rest of Osler's collection of Browne's works it occupies an honoured place beside the Vernon plaque, which portrays Osler in profile. The plaque is set above the panel behind which rest Osler's ashes.

Osler was under the impression that he had bought his 1862 edition of *Religio Medici* in 1867.² His inscription on the title-page, written at Trinity College, Toronto, is dated Feb. 28, 1968. Whatever the exact date of purchase, this was his first acquisition of a work by Sir Thomas Browne and so became the father of his extensive Browne collection.

There is ample evidence that this volume was Osler's favourite. The late Dr. W.W. Francis, Osler librarian and chief editor of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana*,* has recorded that Osler always kept it near him and would put it in his bag if he was to be away from home for the night.³ In 1905 Osler exhibited his then almost complete collection of the editions of the works of Sir Thomas Browne to a meeting of the Physical Society at Guy's Hospital, London, England. At that time he described his copy of the 1862 edition of *Religio Medici* as his companion since his school-days and the most precious book in his library.⁴ The volume was at Osler's side during his last illness at

the end of 1919. On a flyleaf he wrote the following on Dec. 6, 1919: "I doubt if any man can more truly say of this book 'comes viae vitae'."[†] A few weeks later Osler died. His funeral service was held at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and his 1862 edition of *Religio Medici* lay on the purple pall covering his coffin.^{3,5}

An interesting feature of this volume is the bookplate, designed and etched by Sir William Osler's son, Edward Revere Osler, depicting a Gothic window (Fig. 1). His carpenter's tools

are portrayed in the upper left portion and, on the right, the arms of Christ Church, the Oxford college he had just entered when World War I broke out. Below are his initials and an abbreviated description of himself as the disciple of "Iz Wa" (Isaac Walton). The whole is entwined by his fishing tackle.^{3,6}

It was Sir William Osler's intention that Revere should have the volume for use in his lifetime but that it should rejoin the collection after Revere's death.² To lend emphasis to this intent Osler wrote on a flyleaf: "This copy goes to E.R. Osler — not to McGill. W. Osler. Sept. 21/14." It was of course expected, or at least hoped, that Revere would survive his father by many years but this was not to be. After Revere's death in 1917 the volume remained in Osler's library and eventually came to McGill University.

Shortly before it took its place in the Osler Library at McGill with the rest of the Browne collection, Osler's favourite book made one more appearance at Oxford. Lady Osler died in 1928 and her service, like that of her late husband, was conducted in Christ Church Cathedral. On the purple pall covering her coffin was a small, elegant, gilt-edged volume bound in red morocco — Sir William Osler's 1862 edition of *Religio Medici*.⁷

†Dr. W.W. Francis's translation of *comes viae vitae* was "companion on my life's journey".



FIG. 1—Revere Osler's bookplate.

References

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*A catalogue of books illustrating the history of medicine and science, collected, arranged and annotated by Sir William Osler, Bt. and bequeathed to McGill University.

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